A New Gladiator Enters the National Arena

THIS is the first of two articles on the great "farm movement" in the United States. It summarizes the growth of co-operation and organization among the farmers and reveals some degree of the astonishing strength and scope of their activities.

As "once the embattl'd farmers stood and fired the shot heard round the world," so the farmers of today are preparing to enter upon a legislative battle for what they consider their economic freedom.

A second article will deal with the farmer's grievances and will outline the program of legislation which he is determined Congress shall consider.

THERE are certain signs, not difficult to read, which would seem to indicate that this nation is approaching a new legislative era, an era which will be the third distinct period of the kind within the memory of the present generation.

Back in the days of the McKinley tariff it was industry that received the attention of the lawmakers. Then labor pushed its way to the front and now we have the farmer. Powerfully organized, united in his desires, the agriculturist stands waiting the coming session of Congress to step forward with a program for farm legislation which, if accepted, will bring about as vital changes in the nation as have any of the measures passed during the last 20 years at the behest of either industry or labor.

Agriculture has long lagged behind the movement of the age toward combination. This slowness to respond to the impulse of all modern industrialism to combine resources and to do business on a large scale may be due in part to the fact that the farmer is an individualist, but at any event, the farmer remained aloof during all the earlier years of the era of organization and co-operation.

No longer than five years ago there were many who questioned the feasibility of the Federal Farm Loan on the ground that the American farmer is constitutionally averse to conducting any sort of business in combination. Since then this project has taken root in even the richest farming communities and to its influence may be attributed the awakening of the farmer to the value of collective effort.

Co-operate farm mortgages have revealed in an astonishing way the supreme position of the land as security in times of stress and the farmer, realizing that he is in possession of the premier security of the nation, has made up his mind that he must organize as the best means of promoting and protecting his interests.

Of course, farm organizations of some sort have existed in the United States for 75 years. The Grange, the Farmers' Unions and the Equity Societies have been unceasing champions of the need for united efforts and have done practically all the pioneer work. For many years they were only moderately successful. That they lived through the long, lean period is a tribute to the courage, the purpose and the farsightedness of the men who directed them. Now the tide has turned. The movement has suddenly gained strength and has developed such an impulse toward organization, such a haste to catch up, such a belief in the efficacy of organization, that the multiplicity of movements, unions, bureaus, councils, societies, boards, federations and confederations becomes almost confusing.

A recital of the mere titles of those national organizations that are concerned with the general agricultural interest is impressive. There are the Granges, the several Societies of Equity, the National Conference on Marketing and Farm Credits, the National Co-operative Association, the Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union of America, the National Farmers' Congress, the Farmers' National Council, the National Federation of Farm Bureaus, and the American Agricultural Organization Society. Of the great organizations named only three extend back in origin to the last century and the majority have come into being in the last decade, while several of the most important and active are the growth of the last four or five years.

In a survey of farm organizations one notes that they are roughly separable into two sorts of organizations. The first is concerned with general principles and purposes, originating in the social sense, and some of these, notably the Grange which is the oldest of all, include the whole farm family in their membership and have rituals, following the custom of secret orders. But beginning in this local way to meet a social craving, they have widened out into federations and as they have done so they have come to express the farm thought on problems and issues that touch the farm interest nationally. Highly organized and important bodies of this last mentioned character are the Grange, the Farmers' National Congress and the American Association for Agricultural Legislation. The other is primarily and directly concerned with the farmers' specific business and is co-operative in the ordinary business sense for profit of the members. Of this class are the Farm Unions or Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union of America, the three independent federations of Societies of Equity, the National Agricultural Society, which operates more as promoter and advisor than as an actual co-operative business in itself. These several national co-operative societies have hundreds of local societies.

A still further distinction may be made among the farm organizations for there are a number that are not strictly bodies of farmers but confederations of affiliated bodies whose national headquarters, ordinarily at Washington, stand for the farm interest and represent it before the country. Such are the National Board of Farm Organizations, the Farmers' National Council and, in a degree, the Farmers' National Congress.

In addition to these there are other movements springing up which are backed by traders and leaders of finance. They are young yet and there has been scant opportunity to observe their purpose, but it seems altogether probable that the intent of those who have sponsored them is to fashion them into opening wedges through which entrance may be forced into the inner councils of the farm movement. It is a shrewd plan and may be fairly accepted as proof that at least some of the captains of trade recognize the quarter from which the next great national movement is coming.

No doubt the branching out of the farmers' retail, wholesale and manufacturing enterprises has been partially responsible for awakening these men to what is taking place. Six years ago there was said to be not over 500 or 600 co-operative concerns in the United States. Today the number exceeds 4,000, handling, as the secretary of agriculture estimated in the last annual report of his department, upward of $1,500,000,000 annually through the marketing of farm products, the operation of elevators, warehouses, fire insurance companies, wholesale houses, retail business and the purchase or manufacture of goods.

The farmer does not stand upon ceremony in his organization meetings. He will use anything from a circus tent to a village hall.

In order to understand the strength of the farmer politically as well as economically, one will do well to study the organizations which he has built up, noting their scope, their efficiency and the great number of their members.

One of the typical co-operative societies will answer for all, therefore let us consider the Farmers' Equity-Union, one of the three large Equity Societies. This body was organized in 1910 in Illinois and operates chiefly in the Middle West. It is selected for description over all other like societies because of its unique feature of central exchanges. The local exchanges are organized at small market points and are carefully chosen. They market the products of their members and purchase machinery, lumber, coal, fertilizer, flour, butter and other commodities. At the close of the year there is a fixed three per cent dividend to stockholders and a distribution of profits or savings, the individual member's return being prorated according to the business he did with the exchange.

The large central exchanges of this society are situated at Denver, Kansas City, Chicago and Lima, Ohio. These are also stock corporations, the stockholders being the local exchanges. There is a three per cent dividend and a distribution of profits. The Equity-Union conducts what is probably the largest co-operative creamery in the nation at Aberdeen, South Dakota, doing a business of approximately $10,000,000 a year.

To obtain a sense of the scope of the present farm organization movement, however, one must also make a brief survey of the class of organizations which are not distinctly co-operative but represent the general farm interests. In doing this one naturally begins with the Grange, of which it is scarcely necessary to say more than that it is the oldest and best known, as well as one of the most powerful and extensive of all farm bodies. It was organized in 1866 and its annual meeting is attended by 4,000 delegates representing 600,000 members, most of whom are in the states of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan.

The National Board of Farm Organizations is a confederation of thirteen large national farm organizations. In a sense it is the clearing house through which they voice their sentiment on national legislation. It has headquarters at Washington and is one of the most powerful exponents before the public of the common thought and interest of the American farm.

An organization with a somewhat similar purpose, although essentially political, is the Farmers' National Council, a bureau conducted at Washington. In spite of many bitter controversies with more conservative and less political farm organizations, the National Council has survived for 10 years and is more active today than ever before.

A national body which is quite unique in its organization is the Farmers' National Congress. It is a pioneer national agricultural body growing out of a meeting of representative farmers in 1881. From that year it has met annually to discuss agricultural problems and political questions relating to farm interests and is one of the most powerful exponents of the agriculturist. It is constituted of members named by the governors of states or by the state agricultural society, in case the governor fails to act. Members of the congress must be men engaged in agriculture and are usually representative and leading figures in their states, often with a national reputation. The significant feature of the Farmers' National Congress is the annual platform of resolutions, always a comprehensive utterance in behalf of the American farm. It is represented in Washington by the National Board of Farm Organizations.

One of the youngest and still most powerful of the greater national farm organizations is the National Federation of Farm Bureaus. It originated in the Middle West in the organization of a few local farm bureaus, whose only purpose at that time was to aid the local farmer by bringing him expert advice and modern scientific agriculture as taught in the agricultural colleges. These bureaus employed a local or county farm agent at a salary to visit farmer-members on call without cost to them other than their annual dues of $2.

Looked upon with suspicion and derision at first by practical farmers, the farm agents very quickly overcame these prejudices and the farm bureaus soon spread from county to county and from state to state, so that within four years a national organization was formed in which more than 37 states are represented with a total membership of almost a million and with a fund of $200,000 available annually for any work which the national body undertakes. Young as it is this giant among the farm organizations seems to have found itself and to have developed very definite plans for the future.

Some idea of the influence which the organizations briefly described here have already had upon the course of national legislation may be obtained from reading over a partial list of the measures which they have sponsored and helped to place on the statute books. These bodies were a power in urging the creation of the interstate commerce, they backed postal savings banks, the pure food laws, parcel post, rural credits, prohibition and restriction of immigration.

While it has been necessary to omit reference to many strong organizations, enough has been set forth to suggest the extent and earnestness of this movement. It is evident that co-operation has taken firm root in the soil of the farm and that its growth has been spontaneous and sincere rather than artificial.

It must be very evident also that these organizations, representing two-thirds of the farmers of the nation, have invested the agriculturist with a new political dignity and that the time has passed when the politicians can wave him away. The farmer himself knows this and the next Congress will certainly see his forces in the field behind the broadest legislative program ever framed by the agricultural interests.